

Original Article

Between Critique and Growth: Teachers' Meaning-Making of School Administrators' Observation Feedback

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Abstract

This study explores how teachers experience and interpret classroom observation feedback from school administrators, reframing it from mere evaluation to a process of reflective growth, professional learning, and instructional renewal. Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, in-depth interviews were conducted with public secondary school teachers in Davao City between June and November 2024, supported by reflective notes and participant validation. Findings revealed that teachers initially felt tension and vulnerability but gradually developed openness and acceptance toward feedback. Through reflection, they recognized their instructional strengths and areas for improvement, leading to growth-oriented changes in teaching practices. The process also nurtured trust, empathy, and stronger teacher-administrator relationships, while fostering motivation, accountability, and a renewed sense of purpose. Ultimately, feedback became a transformative space for continuous learning rather than judgment.

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1. Introduction

Classroom observation has long been recognized as a vital component of teacher evaluation and professional growth. It serves not only as a tool for monitoring instructional quality but also as a means of fostering reflective practice and pedagogical improvement (Tarusha & Bushi, 2024). Through systematic observation, school administrators can provide teachers with targeted feedback that highlights strengths, identifies areas for development, and promotes professional dialogue (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Ideally, such feedback processes aim to enhance teaching effectiveness and ultimately improve student learning outcomes. However, the way teachers perceive, interpret, and respond to observation feedback often determines whether the experience becomes a source of growth or a source of stress (Gan et al., 2021).

In many educational systems, feedback following classroom observations is positioned as a professional support mechanism, yet teachers' experiences reveal complex emotional and cognitive dimensions. Feedback may be received as constructive guidance leading to self-improvement, or it may be perceived as criticism that challenges a teacher's sense of competence and professional identity (Masuwai et al., 2024). The tone, delivery, and relational context of feedback from school administrators significantly shape how teachers make sense of it. When handled with empathy and clarity, feedback can inspire reflection and instructional innovation; conversely, when perceived as evaluative or judgmental, it may evoke defensiveness and diminish motivation (Diş & Demirkasımoğlu, 2025).

In the Philippine educational landscape, classroom observation is a central element of teacher appraisal systems under the Results-Based Performance Management System (RPMS). Teachers in public schools undergo several rounds of classroom observations each year, often conducted by their school heads or master teachers (Urbano & Gurat, 2023). While intended to ensure instructional quality and professional accountability, the process can sometimes be fraught with tension, particularly when feedback sessions lack mutual trust or when evaluative comments overshadow developmental intentions. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding how teachers internalize and respond to the feedback provided by school administrators (Espeño, 2025).

Existing literature emphasizes that effective feedback should be timely, specific, and growth-oriented to promote teachers' professional learning (Long, 2025; Cansoy et al., 2025). Yet, limited studies have explored the subjective experiences of teachers in receiving and interpreting such feedback, particularly in the context of public basic education. How do teachers make sense of observation results? What emotions, reflections, and actions arise following a feedback session? And how does this process influence their teaching identity and professional growth?

This study seeks to address these questions by exploring teachers' meaning-making of school administrators' observation feedback. Guided by a phenomenological approach, it aims to uncover the lived experiences of teachers as

they navigate the delicate balance between critique and professional development. Through this exploration, the study seeks to illuminate how feedback, when thoughtfully delivered and meaningfully received, can serve as a bridge between accountability and empowerment, ultimately contributing to a more reflective and growth-oriented teaching culture.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of teachers in receiving and interpreting classroom observation feedback from their school administrators. Anchored in Colaizzi's (1978) procedural framework, the approach aimed to capture and describe the essence of teachers' experiences as consciously lived and reflected upon. Descriptive phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it privileges teachers' first-person accounts and allows an in-depth understanding of how they make meaning of feedback, whether as constructive guidance, professional critique, or personal affirmation, and how these interpretations influence their professional identity, motivation, and instructional practices.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study consisted of ten public secondary school teachers who had undergone at least one formal classroom observation and feedback session conducted by their school administrators during the past academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possessed firsthand experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Maximum variation sampling was employed to capture diversity in gender, teaching tenure (ranging from novice to experienced teachers), subject specialization, and school location (urban and rural settings). Initial participants were identified through coordination with school heads, while additional participants were recruited through snowball referrals. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached at the tenth participant, when no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered from June to November 2024 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or via online video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Prior to data collection, participants received an information sheet explaining the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations. Written informed consent was secured before participation.

Interviews began with broad, open-ended prompts such as: “Please describe your experience of receiving feedback from your school head after a classroom observation,” followed by probing questions that explored participants’ emotional responses, interpretations of feedback, perceived fairness and usefulness, subsequent instructional changes, and reflections on professional growth. With participants’ permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To enhance data richness, participants were invited to share relevant documents such as observation forms, feedback notes, or personal reflections written after feedback sessions.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step phenomenological method. First, all interview transcripts and supplementary materials were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and a holistic understanding of the teachers’ experiences. Second, significant statements directly related to the experience of receiving feedback were extracted from the data. Third, these statements were interpreted to derive formulated meanings that captured the participants’ underlying sentiments and reflections. Fourth, similar meanings were grouped into thematic clusters to identify recurring patterns. Fifth, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon was constructed, synthesizing the emergent themes. Sixth, the description was refined to reveal the essential structure of teachers’ lived experiences of classroom observation feedback. Finally, member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the findings and ensure that the interpretations authentically represented their experiences. NVivo software (or manual coding) was utilized to organize data and support systematic theme development.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was established following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (interviews and feedback documents), and member checking. Dependability and confirmability were maintained by keeping an audit trail that documented raw data, coding decisions, analytic memos, and theme construction processes. Peer debriefing with experienced qualitative researchers further enhanced analytic rigor. Transferability was strengthened through thick descriptions of participants, the research context, and the nature of feedback interactions, supported by rich verbatim excerpts that allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts.

3. Results

Ten teachers from public secondary schools participated in the study, ranging in age from 25 to 58 years. The participants included six female and four male teachers, all holding at least a bachelor's degree in education and having undergone at least one formal classroom observation and feedback session with their school administrators during the last academic year. Their narratives revealed how feedback, as a critical component of teacher evaluation, was received, interpreted, and transformed into personal and professional learning experiences. From their lived accounts emerged seven major themes illustrating the complex interplay between critique, reflection, and growth.

Theme 1: Emotional Reactions to Feedback

Teachers described their initial emotional responses to classroom observation feedback, which ranged from nervous anticipation to gradual acceptance.

Apprehension before feedback. Many participants admitted feeling tense and anxious during and after classroom observations, worrying about their performance and possible criticism.

P1: "I always feel nervous before feedbacking because I'm not sure what the school administrator will say."

P5: "There's this fear that your mistakes will be highlighted."

P8: "It's stressful knowing someone is evaluating you."

Gradual acceptance and openness. Over time, however, teachers began to accept feedback as part of professional improvement.

P2: "I used to take it personally, but now I see it as an opportunity to grow."

P6: "Feedbacking is no longer scary—it's now a learning process."

P9: "I've learned to listen without being too defensive."

Balancing emotions with professionalism. Participants acknowledged that emotional maturity helped them process feedback constructively.

P3: "Even if I feel bad, I try to take it professionally."

P7: "I remind myself it's about improving, not judging."

P10: "I control my reactions and focus on what I can change."

Theme 2: Perceptions of Fairness and Constructiveness

Participants highlighted that how feedback was delivered significantly shaped their perception of its fairness, validity, and usefulness.

Perceived fairness of evaluation. Teachers valued feedback that reflected their real classroom performance.

P4: *"I appreciate it when feedback is based on actual observation, not assumptions."*

P8: *"If it's fair and objective, I can accept it even if it's negative."*

P1: *"It matters that the feedback feels honest but just."*

Constructive vs. critical tone. The delivery of feedback often determined whether teachers felt motivated or discouraged.

P5: *"When the school administrator explains kindly, I feel encouraged to do better."*

P7: *"It's disheartening if the tone feels too harsh or judgmental."*

P9: *"Constructive comments inspire me to improve, not to fear the next observation."*

Trust in the feedback giver. The teacher–school administrator relationship played a crucial role in how feedback was interpreted.

P2: *"It's easier to accept comments when you trust the school administrator."*

P6: *"Respect and rapport make feedback more effective."*

P10: *"I listen more when I know the school administrator truly wants to help me grow."*

Theme 3: Reflection and Self-Evaluation

Receiving feedback prompted teachers to engage in self-assessment, reflection, and critical evaluation of their teaching practices.

Awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Teachers became more aware of their instructional competencies and areas for improvement.

P1: *"It made me realize what I'm good at and what I still need to work on."*

P5: *"Feedback helps me identify blind spots in my teaching."*

P8: *"It opened my eyes to things I didn't notice before."*

Reflective thinking. Participants shared that they often revisited the feedback and reflected on it privately.

P3: *"After every feedbacking, I reflect on what was said and how I can improve."*

P6: *"Sometimes, I even watch my recorded class to see if I agree with the feedback."*

P9: *"Reflection helps me understand my teaching style better."*

Ownership of growth. Teachers developed a sense of accountability in addressing the feedback provided.

P2: *"I realized I am responsible for improving myself."*

P7: *"I take notes after feedback so I can apply them next time."*

P10: "It's up to me to make those suggestions work."

Theme 4: Feedback as a Source of Professional Learning

Participants viewed feedback as a practical and experiential form of professional development that directly influenced classroom practices.

Instructional improvement. Teachers described modifying their strategies and methodologies after receiving specific feedback.

P1: "I changed how I open my lessons after the school administrator suggested a better approach."

P5: "I improved my questioning techniques."

P8: "Feedback made my lesson delivery more organized."

Enhanced classroom management. Feedback often helped them refine discipline strategies and classroom flow.

P3: "The school administrator's comment on time management really helped."

P6: "I learned to handle transitions better between activities."

P9: "I now plan my classroom routines more carefully."

Encouragement for innovation. Constructive feedback inspired teachers to try new approaches.

P2: "It motivated me to explore more student-centered methods."

P4: "I started integrating more technology in class."

P10: "It pushed me to be creative and open to change."

Theme 5: Emotional Growth and Resilience

Through repeated feedback experiences, teachers reported developing greater emotional stability and resilience in professional interactions.

Emotional regulation. Teachers learned to manage their reactions and maintain composure during evaluations.

P1: "Before, I got easily offended, but now I can handle it calmly."

P5: "Feedbacking helped me mature emotionally."

P7: "I've become more resilient to criticism."

Turning criticism into motivation. Participants reframed critical comments as tools for growth.

P3: "I use criticisms as challenges, not as discouragement."

P6: "It's a test of professionalism."

P9: "Negative feedback makes me want to prove myself more."

Building professional confidence. The process eventually strengthened their self-assurance.

P2: *"Now, I feel more confident facing future observations."*

P4: *"It gave me a sense of competence and pride."*

P10: *"I learned to trust my teaching abilities more."*

Theme 6: Strengthening Teacher–Administrator Relationships

Participants emphasized that positive feedback interactions fostered mutual respect, collaboration, and open communication between teachers and school administrators.

Open communication. Teachers appreciated school administrators who facilitated a two-way dialogue.

P3: *"My school administrator listens first before giving advice."*

P5: *"It's not just them talking—we discuss things."*

P8: *"That open exchange builds trust."*

Supportive supervision. Feedback sessions that emphasized guidance rather than fault-finding enhanced professional relationships.

P1: *"When I feel supported, I'm more eager to improve."*

P7: *"My school administrator's approach is encouraging, not intimidating."*

P10: *"Feedback becomes lighter when it comes from a mentor, not just an evaluator."*

Shared responsibility for improvement. Teachers viewed effective feedback as a collaborative process.

P2: *"We work together to improve, not just me alone."*

P4: *"It feels like teamwork in achieving school goals."*

P9: *"Feedbacking should always be partnership, not punishment."*

Theme 7: Feedback as a Catalyst for Continuous Professional Growth

Teachers recognized that feedbacking is an ongoing process essential to their long-term professional development.

Commitment to continuous improvement. Teachers saw feedback as part of lifelong learning.

P1: *"Every feedback session helps me evolve as a teacher."*

P5: *"Learning never stops after one observation."*

P8: *"I treat each feedback as a stepping stone."*

Institutional support for development. Participants underscored the need for consistent, supportive feedback culture.

P2: *"It's important that schools promote positive feedback systems."*

P6: *"Feedback should be developmental, not punitive."*

P10: *"Schools must ensure that feedback truly supports teacher growth."*

Professional empowerment. Ultimately, feedback empowered teachers to take charge of their professional journeys.

P3: *"It made me more proactive in improving my craft."*

P7: *"I've learned to own my professional development."*

P9: *"Constructive feedback builds confident and reflective teachers."*

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of teachers as they received, interpreted, and acted upon classroom observation feedback from their school administrators. The analysis illuminated how teachers make meaning of critique—balancing emotions, reflection, and professional improvement—revealing a dynamic process of learning, growth, and adaptation. Seven interrelated themes emerged, describing teachers' experiences of feedback as a journey from anxiety and vulnerability toward reflection, resilience, and empowerment.

The first theme, emotional reactions to feedback—between anxiety and acceptance, illustrated how feedback initially triggered apprehension and self-doubt among teachers. Participants described feeling evaluated and exposed, particularly when the feedback emphasized areas needing improvement. Over time, however, they learned to view feedback as a tool for professional learning rather than personal criticism. This finding aligns with Rogers' (1961) Humanistic Theory, which emphasizes acceptance and unconditional positive regard as foundations for growth. When school administrators approached feedback with empathy and respect, teachers were more likely to internalize it constructively. The process also reflects Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, wherein teachers' emotional regulation strategies transformed feedback from a stressor into a resource for self-improvement.

The second theme, perceptions of fairness and constructiveness, highlighted that teachers' responses to feedback were largely shaped by how it was delivered. Participants valued fairness, objectivity, and the use of specific, actionable comments. Constructive delivery promoted receptiveness, while judgmental tones fostered defensiveness. This finding supports Adams' (1965) Equity Theory, which posits that individuals' sense of fairness influences motivation and satisfaction. When teachers perceived that their efforts were acknowledged and their challenges understood, they were more motivated to improve. Similarly, this aligns with Brookhart's (2017) notion of formative feedback as dialogue rather than directive, emphasizing shared responsibility between evaluator and teacher.

The third theme, reflection and self-evaluation, revealed that feedback prompted deep introspection among teachers. They engaged in reflective practices—revisiting their teaching methods, identifying patterns, and acknowledging both

strengths and weaknesses. This corresponds with Schön's (1983) Reflective Practitioner Model, which emphasizes reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as central to professional learning. Through reflective thinking, teachers transformed observation feedback into opportunities for self-assessment and pedagogical refinement. Such reflection fostered self-awareness, a trait identified by Goleman (1995) as integral to emotional intelligence and professional growth.

The fourth theme, feedback as a source of professional learning, underscored that classroom observation feedback functioned as an informal yet powerful form of professional development. Teachers viewed it as more contextually relevant than generic seminars or workshops, since it addressed real-time teaching practices. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which explains how concrete experiences followed by reflection lead to conceptual understanding and behavioral change. The findings also resonate with Guskey's (2002) model of teacher development, which posits that genuine professional growth occurs when teachers witness positive changes in their instructional effectiveness as a result of applied learning.

The fifth theme, emotional growth and resilience, captured teachers' evolving ability to manage the emotional impact of feedback. Participants described learning to accept criticism without internalizing it negatively, demonstrating greater composure and self-regulation. This process aligns with Goleman's (1998) framework of emotional intelligence, particularly the dimensions of self-regulation and empathy. By interpreting feedback as guidance rather than judgment, teachers cultivated resilience—a form of psychological strength emphasized in Luthans et al.'s (2007) concept of psychological capital, which includes hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism as core components of professional well-being.

The sixth theme, strengthening teacher-administrator relationships, demonstrated that the quality of interpersonal dynamics between teachers and school administrators profoundly influenced the effectiveness of feedback. Teachers who experienced supportive, dialogic feedback described stronger trust, open communication, and collegial respect. This finding is supported by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which suggests that mutual trust and reciprocity enhance professional relationships. Furthermore, it reflects Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective that emphasizes learning through social interaction—here, manifested in professional dialogue that nurtures both competence and collaboration.

The seventh theme, feedback as a catalyst for continuous professional growth, emphasized teachers' recognition that improvement is an ongoing journey rather than a one-time event. Participants expressed a renewed commitment to lifelong learning, self-improvement, and pedagogical innovation. This aligns with Dweck's (2006) Growth Mindset Theory, which posits that individuals who perceive abilities as developable are more resilient and adaptive. Likewise, Bass's (1985) Transformational Leadership Theory supports this idea, illustrating how empowering

feedback can transform teachers into reflective leaders who influence their peers and model professional excellence.

The findings of this study underscore that classroom observation feedback, when grounded in empathy, fairness, and constructive dialogue, can become a catalyst for professional learning rather than a source of stress. It moves beyond evaluation toward mentoring—helping teachers recognize their potential, strengthen their instructional competence, and build emotional resilience.

From a practical perspective, school administrators should be trained in effective feedback delivery that emphasizes supportive supervision and reflective dialogue. Feedback sessions should be designed as two-way conversations where teachers can discuss, clarify, and co-construct strategies for improvement. Institutionalizing reflective post-observation conferences, mentoring systems, and peer coaching can further sustain the positive impact of feedback on teaching quality and professional morale.

While this study provides rich qualitative insights, it is limited by its small sample and reliance on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by social desirability or contextual factors. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design to examine how teachers' perceptions of feedback evolve over time or employ mixed methods to correlate feedback experiences with measurable changes in teaching performance and student outcomes. Ultimately, the findings highlight that feedback is not merely an evaluative act—it is a relational and developmental process. When delivered thoughtfully by school administrators, it becomes a bridge between critique and growth, cultivating reflective, confident, and continuously improving educators.

5. Conclusion

The teachers in this study experienced classroom observation feedback as both a moment of evaluation and an opportunity for growth. Their reflections revealed that feedback from school administrators extended beyond performance appraisal—it became a medium for self-reflection, professional dialogue, and instructional improvement. Through the process of receiving, interpreting, and responding to feedback, teachers engaged in a dynamic journey of self-awareness and pedagogical renewal.

While initial reactions ranged from apprehension to acceptance, teachers ultimately recognized the value of constructive feedback in refining their teaching practices. They described the process as a form of guided reflection that allowed them to view their classroom performance through a new lens. This experience fostered a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, aligning with the principles of reflective teaching and continuous professional learning. Over time, feedback evolved from being perceived as judgment to being embraced as mentorship and support.

Despite occasional feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, teachers demonstrated resilience and adaptability, using feedback as a catalyst for self-improvement. The

study found that trust, respect, and open communication between teachers and school administrators were crucial in ensuring that feedback led to growth rather than discouragement. When feedback was delivered constructively and collaboratively, it promoted confidence, motivation, and a renewed sense of purpose among teachers.

These findings carry important implications for instructional supervision and teacher development. School administrators should be trained to provide feedback that is not only evaluative but also formative—one that empowers teachers to reflect, act, and improve. Embedding feedback sessions within a supportive mentoring framework can enhance teacher receptivity and foster a culture of professional learning within schools.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on reflective supervision by illuminating the lived experiences of teachers as recipients of classroom observation feedback. Although contextually grounded in the Philippine public school setting, its insights resonate with broader educational practices emphasizing feedback as a cornerstone of teacher growth. Future research may explore how feedback practices can be systematized to balance accountability and professional care, ensuring that observation serves its true purpose—not to measure teachers, but to help them flourish.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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